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# Going beyond climate ethics: virtuousness in climate change initiatives

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# Going beyond climate ethics: virtuousness in climate change initiatives

## **Abstract**

This paper examines the place of virtuousness in climate change initiatives and presents a framework to assess the extent of virtuousness in mitigation and adaptation strategies. Although some argue that climate change is fundamentally an ethical issue, compared to the scientific literature on climate change, the body of climate ethics literature is more recent and considerably smaller. According to Posas (2007), since the first warning of climate change by an oceanographer in 1957, the most significant milestones in terms of introducing an ethical perspective to climate change was the Buenos Aires Declaration in December, 2004. At the same time, there has been a growing interest in academia of what is now come to be known as 'climate ethics'. The climate ethics discourse now includes philosophical contributions, such as of Singer (2002) and Gardiner (2004), and the role of religion in climate ethics (Posas, 2007).

## **Keywords**

beyond, going, change, climate, ethics, initiatives, virtuousness

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**Going Beyond Climate Ethics: Virtuousness in Climate Change Initiatives**

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## **Going Beyond Climate Ethics: Virtuousness in Climate Change Initiatives**

### **Introduction**

This paper examines the place of virtuousness in climate change initiatives and presents a framework to assess the extent of virtuousness in mitigation and adaptation strategies.

Although some argue that climate change is fundamentally an ethical issue, compared to the scientific literature on climate change, the body of climate ethics literature is more recent and considerably smaller. According to Posas (2007), since the first warning of climate change by an oceanographer in 1957, the most significant milestones in terms of introducing an ethical perspective to climate change was the Buenos Aires Declaration in December, 2004. At the same time, there has been a growing interest in academia of what is now come to be known as ‘climate ethics’. The climate ethics discourse now includes philosophical contributions, such as of Singer (2002) and Gardiner (2004), and the role of religion in climate ethics (Posas, 2007).

Despite these contributions, key intergovernmental climate change policy instruments such as the Kyoto Protocol and national policy documents such as Australia’s Garnaut Climate Change Review (Garnaut, 2008) devotes little or no ethical reasoning for its proposed mitigation and adaptation strategies. For example, the words ‘ethics’ and ‘ethical’ appear only once each in the body of the report (in an IPCC quote) and in the reference list of the 680 page Garnaut report (September, 2008). Even those policy documents such as UK’s Stern Report which explicitly acknowledge the consequentialist, welfarist and rights views, expose its mitigation and adaptation strategies for critique due

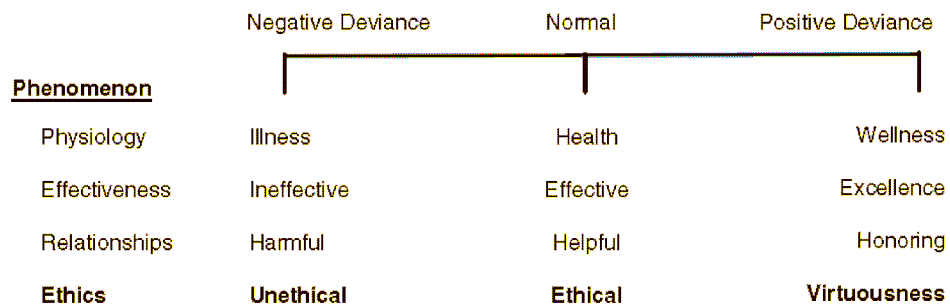
to conflicting moral arguments, and thus, run the risk of losing credibility as an effective policy instrument. This paper explores how assessing climate change initiatives against a higher moral standard than that of ethics could help develop effective climate change policies that overcome the problem of conflicting moral reasoning in intergovernmental and governmental climate change policy making, thus helping to promote equity, distributive justice and virtue among governments, organizations and people around the world.

### **Climate Ethics and Virtuousness**

According to Gardiner (2004), 'climate change is fundamentally an ethical issue' (p. 556). Ethics is a 'field of philosophical inquiry that examines concepts and their employment about what is right and wrong, obligatory and non-obligatory, and when responsibility should attach to human actions that cause harm' (Brown *et al.*, 2006, p.7). Virtuousness differs from ethics, as virtuousness goes beyond behaving within ethical rules, resulting in developing personal and communal excellence (Bright *et al.*, 2006). Thus, virtuousness is a 'different kind of standard that guides individuals to enact excellence in character and moral judgment' (Bright *et al.*, 2006, p.249). Examining the virtuousness of climate change initiatives in relation to ethics has two major benefits.

First is the inability of regulatory codes such as the Kyoto Protocol to predict every possible ethical dilemma in initiating and managing climate change action. As Bright *et al.*, (2006) point out, this is particularly the case when change is ubiquitous as in climate change, making it difficult to find the 'right' answers based on conflicting moral

arguments. Thus, an ethos of virtuousness, according to Bright *et al.*, (2006), transcends situational dynamics and ‘enables behaviors and decisions that rise above what is merely expected in ethical conduct’ (p.250). The second benefit of examining virtuousness as opposed to ethics is that the absence of unethical behavior does not guarantee the presence of highly principled behavior. Cameron (2003) explains the differences between unethical, ethical and virtuousness-driven behaviors through a continuum of deviance from normal or acceptable behavior (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Continuum illustrating differences in the characteristics of social science phenomena** (from Bright *et al.*, 2006, p.250).

While the left side of the figure (negative deviance) is associated with harmful, unethical or dishonest behavior, the center projects acceptable, normal or ethical behavior. The right side of the continuum is associated with virtuousness or flourishing (Bright *et al.*, 2006), what mitigation and adaptation models should aim for. Before we examine how virtuousness could be integrated into mitigation and adaptation models, we need to ask

why we need a higher moral standard than that of ethics to develop effective climate change policies. Let us focus our attention on the Kyoto Protocol—the best initiative of the human race to combat climate change (Gardiner, 2004). It is saddled with problems. Thus one is entitled to question whether we have framed the climate change issue appropriately. Let us briefly examine the development of Kyoto Protocol.

### **Kyoto Protocol and the Need for a Higher Moral Standard in Climate Change**

#### **Initiatives**

Gardiner (2004) provides an excellent account of Kyoto Protocol's development so far. He explains that the current state of affairs in climate change initiatives is a result of three main phases. Starting with the Rio Earth Summit of 1992, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change documented the nations' commitment to stabilize 'greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system' and agreed to 'common but differentiated responsibilities'. Thus under this understanding, richer, industrialized nations were expected to lead in cutting emissions, while the less developed countries would pursue their own development and take significant action only in the future. Although some rich countries (including the United States, European Union, Japan, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Norway) announced voluntary stabilization levels, these declarations were not lived up to and their emissions continued to rise without constraint. It thus gave rise to the second phase of the current international move towards tackling climate change.

At the Berlin meeting in 1995, the parties agreed to accept binding constraints on their emissions, which in 1997 was agreed in Japan as the Kyoto Protocol. Although first appearing as a major success, as Gardiner (2004) aptly points out, ‘the promise of Kyoto turned out to be short lived’ (p. 591). With a subsequent meeting to confirm details of the Protocol action, the agreement broke down in Hague (2000), and the US withdrawal in 2001 ended any real chance of Kyoto’s success. However, in the same year, the Bonn and Marrakesh meetings gave rise to the third phase where full agreement was negotiated and participating governments’ ratification was sought. With the recent ratification of Australia, Kyoto Protocol has survived and efforts to combat global climate change appear to be still on track. However, several argue that Kyoto Protocol is deeply flawed; both in its substance and its background assumptions (see Gardiner, 2004).

The first substantive flaw is that Kyoto does very little to limit emissions. With concessions given to some countries to encourage them to ratify Kyoto, research projects that even if full compliance is followed by the signatories, their emissions would have increased by 9 percent above 2000 levels by the end of the first commitment period. Coupled with emissions growth in the developing countries, another substantial global increase by 2012 is to be expected. However, Gardiner points out some merits in Kyoto in that the current agreement has to be valued procedurally (as a necessary first step), symbolically (for showing that some kind of agreement is possible), geopolitically (for showing that the rest of the world can act without the United States) and as simply the best that is possible under current conditions (p. 592).



The second substantive criticism of Kyoto is on its weak compliance mechanism. This criticism arises because of the weak or little enforcement powers of Kyoto. While on the one hand, enforcement is not binding on any country that fails to ratify the amendment necessary to punish it (Barrett 2003, p. 386), on the other, the penalties take the form of more demanding targets in the next decade's commitment period—but parties can take this into account when negotiating their targets for that commitment period.

Perhaps the most significant flaw of them all is Kyoto's flaws in its background assumptions. The Protocol assumes an acceptable deal on climate can be made without addressing the wider issue of international justice. For example, the disparity in the treatment between cost of coping climate change and cost of preventing future climate change (Shue 1992, p. 384). The Kyoto Protocol focus is on cost-effectiveness thus, marginalizing the attention to ethical issues.

Thus we can identify several reasons for the failure of Kyoto. One is due to reasons including the political role of energy interests, confusion about scientific uncertainties and economic costs, and the inadequacies of the international system (Gardiner, 2004). Here the role of United States features prominently. Prominent thinkers like Peter Singer claim that as a nation with 4 percent of world' population and emissions at 25 percent of global GHG emissions, United States role in weakening Kyoto in the early meetings and subsequent abandoning of the treaty is unethical that the moral case for economic sanctions against the United States is stronger than it was for apartheid South Africa on

the basis that the South African regime's harm was localized to its citizens whereas United States harms citizens of other countries.

If Kyoto Protocol was the best initiative of the human race to combat climate change, and it saddled with the problems as outlined before, one is entitled to question whether we have framed the climate change issue appropriately. As pointed out earlier, although climate change is seen fundamentally as an ethical issue, the ethical dimensions of the climate change problem have been given very little attention in major policy documents such as the Kyoto Protocol. Even if due attention was paid to ethical issues from the inception of the Kyoto movement, this paper argues that a higher moral standard is required to address challenging ethical issues such as the intergenerational problem. Assessing the virtuousness of climate change initiatives through modeling could generate more robust, equitable and just outcomes that could avoid further pitfalls in the combat against climate change.

### **Applying Virtuousness to Climate Change Strategies**

Peterson and Seligman (2004) thematically captured common virtues across most cultures and nationalities. Based on these, Bright *et al.*, (2006) propose that virtuousness is a form of character excellence that can be attributed to individuals and also to organizations (p.251). They identify three key elements of virtuousness: human impact, moral goodness and unconditional societal benefit. Let us consider each of these in light of the allocation problem of atmospheric targets or GHG emission reduction targets among people, organizations and governments.

The first criterion of virtuousness is the extent of human impact. The virtuousness model developed by Bright *et al.*, (2006) suggests that allocations should be based on the extent of resilience, well being and improvement of livelihood brought about by the respective initiatives. If the process includes future generations as well, then the course to follow would be to allocate responsibility to people, organizations and governments in a way that maximizes the positive human impact to all generations. No generation should have more access to the climate than others. Thus, the first element of virtuousness demands that national governments, organizations and people should assess whether their proposed strategies are designed to generate maximum positive human impact.

To be considered virtuous, mitigation and adaptation strategies should also pass the moral goodness test which is based on the concept of ‘character traits in people and organisations that are seen as desirable’ (Bright, 2006, p.753). What is commonly construed as ‘the good’ is defined within the boundaries of organizing communities, and ‘the common good is achieved when each person contributes to the whole in accord with his or her abilities and with the awareness of the legitimate needs of others’ (Arjoon, 2000, p.165). The challenge here is assessing whether the mitigation and adaptation strategies are based on a motivation of human excellence that transcends instrumental reciprocity, i.e., without intent to induce a specific response in or from others (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). Decisions should be made based on the perspective that a choice is ‘the right thing to do’, even in the absence of clearly definable benefits. For example, when behavior is designed to acquire benefit for the national government or to create a

reciprocal arrangement, as in the case of delaying or minimizing climate change action so that no action is required until other nations agree to act, cannot be defined as generating moral goodness (see Weiser and Zadek, 2000). As moral goodness is based on the concept of character traits in people, government and organizations that are seen as desirable, the common good in climate change action is achieved when people, governments and organizations contribute to the whole according to their abilities and with the awareness of the legitimate needs of others. Then, in the context of our allocation problem, if a government voluntarily accepts the allocation figure because it is 'the right thing to do', then this government's climate change initiative to accept the emission target would appear to generate moral goodness. But is there another mitigation and/or adoption strategy this government could adopt that could generate a greater amount of moral good? Thus assessing the second element of virtuousness becomes difficult because the intent of accepting the emission target is a critical factor in assessing the moral good of different alternatives.

Finally, any mitigation and adaptation strategy should meet the unconditional social benefit test. This idea is consistent with the Aristotelian notion of eudemonia, 'which holds that well-being is not a consequence of virtuous action, but rather an inherent aspect of such action' (Park and Peterson, 2003). Unconditional societal benefit is the 'intention to create goods of first intent and to prudently use goods of second intent to instrumentally bring benefit to society' (Bright *et al.*, 2006, p.753). 'Goods of first intent', a chief good which in itself is worthy of pursuit, such as concern for others and common good refer to virtuousness (Bright, 2006, p.752). On the other hand, the pursuit

of goods of second intent, those that are good for the ‘sake of obtaining something else such as profit, prestige and power’ (ibid), is amoral. In the light of findings such as of Agarwal et al., (1999), that ‘in 1996, one U.S. citizen emitted as much as . . . 19 Indians, 30 Pakistanis, 107 Bangladeshis . . . and 269 Nepalis’ (p. 107), purely instrumental motives might come into play when allocating atmospheric targets or GHG emission reduction targets among people, organizations and governments. The respective stances that national governments hold on to can change the intrinsic nature of climate change activity or inactivity into ‘another technique of manipulation and discipline’ (Gergen, 1990, p.154), thereby destroying the inherent virtuousness of the action in the first place. In our allocation example, if a government accepts GHG emissions target for the sake of obtaining something else such as increasing trade, then any good generated from such initiatives are classed as goods of second intent, and without virtue. However, if goods of second intent, in this case increasing trade, are produced incidentally as a byproduct while pursuing first order goods (accepting GHG emission targets), it is likely to generate virtuousness (Bright *et al.*, 2006).

## **Conclusion**

While the brief discussion above attempted to demonstrate the benefit of using the virtuousness principle to climate change problems, it also highlights the practical challenges of assessing the extent of virtuousness generated by the three elements. Bright *et al.* (2006), while operationalizing virtuousness in the context of downsizing, identify two types of virtuousness. As opposed to *tonic* virtuousness, which is generally present as in integrity, hope, kindness and virtuous purpose, the type of virtuousness that is relevant

to climate change initiatives is *phasic* virtuousness. This type manifests as a response to an event such as the September 11 or the Asian tsunami or in this case, the impact of climate change which is being already felt by many people around the globe (see Fernando, 2007). Two key indicators of *phasic* virtuousness are *responsibility* and *forgiveness*. Bright *et al.*, (2006) contend that *responsibility* is linked to theories of social justice and closely linked to empathy. People who take *responsibility* generally feel a sense of identity with others. *Forgiveness* is more likely when offenders take responsibility for their actions and can take place at the collective level when government and organizations adopt a prosocial response to the violation or damage, as in the case of damage already done to the climate.

Thus mitigation and adaption models could include aspects of virtuousness to examine the generation of virtue among different intergovernmental and governmental strategies. Such models could result in more robust, equitable and just outcomes that could avoid further pitfalls in international and national efforts to combat climate change.

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